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THE PAPER THAT WOULDN'T DIE

BY GREG BURK

pany. She shared duties as the *Weekly*'s bookkeeper, supply manager, baby sitter and more — later founding the *Weekly* offshoot *L.A. Style* (1985–88) and the Latino-culture magazine *Si*.

"It was very, very stressful," Joie says of the early days at the *Weekly*. "We were in that crappy little building — rotting carpets in the halls. There was no air conditioning in summer, so when we would paste up the [pages] the wax would melt off."

The start-up was a killer. "We worked right through Thanksgiving. And we worked through Christmas and New Year's. New Year's Eve at midnight, I said, 'Jay, happy New Year,' and he looked up for a second and said, 'What? Oh.' And he went right back to work. The paper was like a baby that was born prematurely, with an unformed heart or something — one that's always in the incubator."

Joie had figured out a Calendar format she believed would make the *Weekly* indispensable, utilizing experts in dance, jazz and the rest. "Our idea was that people would pick up the paper because they just had to know what was going on, and that would give us the opportunity to do whatever we wanted — we wouldn't have to do editorial that would appeal to *anybody* necessarily! That way we could sneak in all our political ideas."

The politics weren't long in surfacing — though Jay, writing his Editor's Statement in a September sample issue of the *Weekly*, hadn't tipped his left hand to potential advertisers, preferring to emphasize the youth-culture and lifestyle coverage. Besides featuring such voices from the cultural jungle as post-rock absurdist Richard Meltzer, Warhol biographer Victor Bockris and punk intellectual Chris Desjardins, the early *Weekly* was making a dent with its revelations: the U.S. involvement with the Shah of Iran, Tom Bradley's neglect of South-Central, the virtually ignored death squads in El Salvador, the scandals behind L.A.'s smog.

"We made an immediate difference," says Jay of the smog ambush. "The head of enforcement was fired the day the article came out."

RUNNING ALL THE LIGHTS

Varney and Ventura belonged to an alien species unfamiliar to the L.A. film establishment.

Before reviewing films for the Austin *Sun*, Ginger Varney, the *Weekly*'s film editor, had been a bartender, an Air Force sergeant and a television weather forecaster. She had applied for a job as a seal trainer, blowing the gig when she cursed a pup that bit her. Today she is a private investigator. "I like it," Ginger chuckles. "You get to ask nosy questions, and you don't have to write."

Michael Ventura credits Ginger with slipping the *Weekly* behind studio fortifications.

"I was nice," says Ginger. "And it turns out that most people out here are not nice. I have this Southern accent, and that was when *Urban Cowboy* was coming out. They wanted to know how many horses I had. I hate horses."

Less kind was Michael, whose reviews sometimes inflamed studios, unaccustomed to harsh treatment in their company town, into pulling their ads. The *Weekly*'s ad staff revolted the first time he trashed an advertiser's product. Complained one ad rep, "My mother always said if you can't say anything nice about somebody, don't say anything at all."

Michael today, while elsewhere maintaining the journalistic assault he perfected with his definitive *Weekly* reviews and columns, has also published four novels. He sums up the original staff's attitude: "We meant the paper to be disruptive and original, and we meant it to be a writers' paper. We wanted it to be souped up, stripped down, a hot rod, burning rubber and going through as many lights as possible."

BURNOUT

Rubber wasn't the only thing burning. As the paper grew, Jay found it harder to deal with the pressure. There were days when he'd shuffle in unable to speak, because his previous night's session of Janovian primal-scream therapy had blown out his vocal cords. He didn't want to raise his voice at the office, and it seemed as if a parade of staffers was screaming at *him*.

One frustrated new accountant, a sidewalk swami on the Venice Pier the week before, used to rise up from the *Weekly*'s scrambled ledgers to pound the desk and bellow with rage. The paper's messengers spent half their time serving small-claims actions against delinquent advertisers. Now and then, paychecks bounced. Many of the underpaid production staff, who routinely slaved 12-hour days on deadline only to watch Jay tear up their work, were frying on crystal meth to keep going. Salary disputes precipitated a work slowdown, and Jay was forced — not for the last time — to sell off some of his shares in the company so he could distribute raises and pay bills.

Into this garden of earthly delights walked Mike Sigman, the *Weekly*'s new general manager.

The year was 1983. Jay had been looking for a victim to wrangle the paper's business and management affairs so he himself could concentrate on the editorial side, and Mike, a bright Long Islander who smiles even when he's in pain, had been a candidate. A Bucknell University philosophy major, at 22 Mike began editing the trade magazine *Record World*, keeping that position until it folded 10 years later, in 1982. He was initially passed over for the *Weekly* job. Jay's original choice didn't work out, though — one of that gentleman's introductory injunctions was to tell the women on the staff to shave their armpits because they looked like lesbians.

"I was entirely unqualified for the *Weekly* job," says Mike. "I didn't know alternative newspapers, I didn't know L.A., and I had never worked on the business side of a publication."

Mike soon realized that mere lack of credentials was the least of his worries. "My first experience at the *Weekly* was this. I was supposed to be met by somebody at the airport holding up a copy of *L.A. Weekly*. There was nobody there. So, after two hours, I took a cab to the office with my bags and everything. Part of my deal was that I got a car, which was supposed to be left for me at the office. But it was a messenger car and had every cigarette butt and Coke can in it, and all this debris. It smelled, and had no gas, and it was dented all over. I was allowed to drive it to and from work, but could never go out to lunch or anything, because all during the day it was out being used.

"The *Weekly* wasn't just dysfunctional, it was absurdly, cosmically screwed up. We would constantly be doing things that no one would believe when I told them that we did them. Like the time we ran a big contest in the paper, and we printed the answers in the same issue." ➤

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